DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 154 690 HE 009 962

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TITLE The Shaping of an Educated Heart.
PUB DATE Apr 78
NOTE 18p.; Address made by the U.S. Commissioner of Education at Beloit College (Wisconsin) commencement exercises

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Role; Decision Making; Ethical Instruction; *Higher Education; Humanism; *Humanistic Education; *Liberal Arts; *Moral Values; Speeches; Values

ABSTRACT

This commencement address stresses three obligations that colleges and universities must assume to strengthen the intellectual and moral fiber of the United States: (1) colleges underscore the unity of life on earth; (2) a college education must be a truly humanizing experience, a process that stresses the dignity of life and deepens the conviction that people are important; and (3) we must begin to weave into the fabric of education the capacity to make judgments, to form convictions, and to act boldly on the values we hold. (Author/MSE)

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ED154690

THE SHAPING OF AN EDUCATED HEART

Address

by

Ernest L. Boyer

United States Commissioner of Education

Delivered at Beloit College

Commencement Exercises

Beloit, Wisconsin

April 21, 1978

Dr. Lewis Thomas--author of Lives of a Cell, and a trustee of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center -- said recently at a meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science that these are not the best of times for the human mind.

> All sorts of things seem to be turning out wrong, and the century seems to be slipping through our fingers here at the end, with almost all promises unfilled.
>
> I cannot begin to guess at all the causes of our cultural sadness, not even the most important ones, but I can think of one thing that is wrong with us and eats away at us: we do not know enough about ourselves.
>
> We are ignorant about how we work, about where we fit in, and most of all about the enormous, imponderable system of life in which we are embedded as working parts....It is a new experience for all of us. It's unfamiliar ground.

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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> Just think, two centuries ago
> we could explain everything
> about everything, out of pure
> reason, and now most of that
> elaborate and harmonious
> structure has come apart before
> our eyes.
>
> We are <u>dumb</u>.

While Dr. Thomas' comment may overstate the case a bit, I am convinced his conclusions cannot be ignored.

The simple truth is that with all of our education, we are not fully satisfied. With all of our erudition

> --there still remains in the pit
> of our stomach a kind of prickly
> ball that tells us something is
> not right.

We all know -- if we are fully honest -- that Josiah Royce was right when he observed that

> we have become
> more knowing
> more clever
> and more skeptical
> but seemingly--
> we do not become
> more profound or
> more reverent.

The simple truth is that the time has come for us to look not only at the quantity of our education,

- o we must be concerned about its quality as well.
- o The time has come to ask just how our schools and colleges relate to such old-fashioned virtues as truth--and justice--and integrity--and human decency.
- o It's time to ask how our higher institutions can keep alive those conditions which our grandparents would have called the qualities of the human spirit.

Therefore, before you leave this happy island of inquiry, may I impose upon you, as graduates, one more fifteen-minute lecture, and suggest three obligations which I believe our Nation's colleges and universities must once again assume if we are to strengthen the intellectual and moral fiber of this Nation.

I

First I believe <u>our colleges underscore the unity of life on this spaceship Earth</u>.

Some years ago, William Arrowsmith declared that the modern university is "unconsciously helping to create a new and special modern chaos in which the environment as a whole is nobody's business and bears nobody's design--a conglomerate whose total disorder is exposed by the ruthless unrelatedness of the parts."

There is some truth to this charge.

- For, with all of our academic subtleties and our countless categories of knowledge, we frequently study all questions except those that matter most.
- And while we can transmit "fragments of information," we frequently ignore another obligation--the need to search out and highlight the "interlocking" threads of human knowledge.

The fact is that students come to college at a time in their lives when the biggest questions press in on them, and yet rarely in the academic programs are these transcendent issues met head on.

- And this leads, for some at least, to acute frustration and disappointment.
- Somerset Maugham in the "Writer's Notebook" writes poignantly of the mountaineer who struggled to reach the top of the highest peak only to discover that instead of seeing the sunrise he found only fog, at which point the writer suggests "he wandered down again."

Many students come to college seeking a broader vision, but finding only fog.

o o o

It was Tolstoy who, as a young man, identified the issues that seemed relentlessly to press in, and the list is relevant yet today. Tolstoy troubled himself with such questions as

- "Why live at all?"
- "What is the cause of my existence and of everyone else's?"

- o "What is the meaning of the cleavage into good and evil which I feel within myself, and why does this cleavage exist?"
- o "What should be the plan of my life?"
- o "What is death; how can I transcend it?"

Where in the college programs can such universal questions be asked? How can students develop the art of wise decision making which, as Walter Lippmann says, "cuts across all specialities."

o o o

This sort of wisdom transcends the disciplines, for again in Lippmann's words,

- o "it can be possessed by anyone who has an imaginative feeling for what really matters to human beings,
- o whether they travel in jet planes or walk on foot,
- o whether they are craftsmen in little workshops or hired hands in an automatic factory run by a computer."

The point is clear enough. We must, I repeat, find ways which will enable us to see the wholeness in life.

- o The learning of our time must engender respect, not just for the physical ecology of this planet, but for the delicate balance of our social ecology as well.
- o Unity, not the fragmentation of knowledge, must be central to our search.

II

Second, a college education must be a truly humanizing experience, a process that stresses the dignity of life and deepens the conviction that people are important.

- o This statement is so simple, it borders on the sentimental.
- o Yet in our busy world of increased emphasis on technology, of pressures and problems on every side of almost hourly crises, one of our most difficult tasks still remains--that of dealing humanely with one another.

o o o

Surrounded, sometimes even mastered, by our inventions, it becomes all too easy to put people into categories. We tend to speak of "engineers," "professors," "bus drivers," the "middle-class," the "silent majority," and on and on we go.

And as we pigeonhole, we distort, losing sight of the fact that we are talking about people--

- o individuals who laugh, who love, who have unique talents and deep aspirations,
- o who grow old and lonely,
- o who have fears and doubts in the dark of night.

o o o

Even on campus we "classify" ourselves and colleagues, and here too we become "economists and deans and mathematicians and radicals and administrators and chancellors and students and the office staff."

We live out Eleanor Rigby--popularized in the Beatles' tune.

- o Eleanor, as you'll recall,
  waited at the window
  "wearing the mask she keeps
  in a jar by the door."
- o We, too, wear our masks, acting
  out our roles as two-dimensional
  people, wearing a "face" we keep
  in a jar by the door.

o o o

The point is this. If we are truly concerned about our Earth home,

- o we must demonstrate that we are
  depending upon one another,
  struggling together, living and
  dying on a single globe,
- o and we must reach out to one
  another to support our common
  cause.

For to talk of saving our Earth while we destroy ourselves is sad mockery indeed. Make no mistake: if we dehumanize ourselves in the process, we spiritually denude our earth.

The sickness of our environment is, at least in part, a mirror of the sickness in ourselves--a reflection of the pervasive notion that life is cheap.

- o Indeed it is here--at this very point--that our rebirth must begin.
- o Respect for life--all of life--must be a bedrock principle if we are to rebuild the physical and social and spiritual environment in which we live.

That great American philosopher Yogi Berra said--

Do a lot of observing by just watching
Do a lot of living -- by loving our earth
and our fellow men.

This then is the objective to which liberal learning must be dedicated.

III

I now turn to my third suggestion, one that follows logically from the last. Somehow we must begin to weave into the fabric of education the capacity to make judgments, to form convictions, and to act boldly upon the values we hold.

- o It is not enough merely to see the world wholly and sensitively--
- o It is not enough simply to respect our fellow man.

- Rather we must continue to develop and refine the capacity to achieve "what is good and what is best"--to confront seriously the problem of "values."

o o o

Whenever a discussion turns to values, a strange embarrassment seems to overtake us all.

- Somehow we have deluded ourselves into believing that we can be responsible people without ever taking sides, without expressing firm convictions about fundamental issues.

On our campuses we frequently seem ready and willing to talk about any and all subjects, except those that matter most.

In his penetrating book, Faith and Learning, Alexander Miller commented rightly on this curious timidity when he wrote:

"A decent tentativeness is a wholesome expression of scholarly humility. We seem to have a sort of dogmatic tentativeness which suggests that (in matters of moral judgment, at least) it is intellectually indecent to make up your minds."

o o o

It is true--I suspect--that on our own campuses we are too often caught up in the thick of thin things, but there is a hopeful side to all of this.

- We now realize that, as George Steiner has reminded us, a man who is intellectually advanced can at the same time be morally bankrupt.
- We now know that such a man can listen to Bach and Schubert at sundown, he can read Goethe in the evening, and the next day go to his daily work at the concentration camp to gas his fellowmen.

o "What grows up inside literate civilization," Steiner asks, "that seems to prepare it for the release of barbarism?"

Steiner's comment not only highlights our dilemma but also dramatizes the disillusionment that has taken root in our midst.

> We are beginning to understand that education does not inevitably humanize.
>
> We are losing faith in the childish notion that all education, regardless of its quality or thrust or purpose, will lead to virtue.

Increasingly then, it becomes clear that if we in education are to exercise a moral force in society, then we must insist that the process of education take place in a moral context.

This is not to suggest a "program of indoctrination" that suffocates the spirit; neither does it mean theory courses that become only speculative and remote.

- o What is called for is a framework of inquiry in which the process of wrestling with big issues and complex values is made fully legitimate--
- o a place where the climate does not push for conclusions, but rather makes honorable the quest.

o o o

When all is said and done, we must call for colleges committed to the development within each student of the capacity to judge rightly in matters of life and conduct.

- o In no way do these imperatives replace the need for rigorous study in the disciplines,
- o but neither must this need destroy the human yearning for an education that leads to a reverence for life and a high regard for the dignity of man.

IV

And now a word about this great Institution before I close.

- o Beloit College is uniquely qualified to help lead the way to the reassembling of our most basic values.
- o This college has for years explored the highest reaches of the human mind without forgetting that intertwined with intellect there is a body, a heart, a soul.

Beloit has long sought to give us the happiest of fusions--the "educated heart."

This easy label, the educated heart, means to me--a reverence for natural and human life and a respect for excellence.

- o The educated heart means the development of an appreciation of beauty,
- o a tolerance of others, a reaching for mastery without arrogance,
- o a courtesy toward opposing view,
- o a dedication to fairness and social justice,

- o an adherence to integrity and precision in thought and speech,
- o an openness to change,
- o and a love for graceful expression and audacious intellect.

These may be lofty ideals but they are still, I am convinced, within man's grasp.

o o o

And for those of you graduating here today--those who have had the privilege of studying at this distinguished institution--I urgently hope that you will be pioneers in seeing to it that our civilization never becomes a society of big machines run by little men.

And if you feel a bit uneasy today--about your faith, your Nation, or who you really are--know that you do not stand alone. But know also that for every doubt there is an affirmation that can be made.

o o o

For the ironies of Charles Dickens' time in the 19th century are with us even now.

o In that earlier day, Dickens said, "it was the worst of times, the best of times, the spring of hope, the winter of despair."

o o o

I'm sure you know that the best things about any college are not what is said but rather what is lived out by its graduates.

o Your assignment from this moment on is to live the Beloit ideal which calls for a life of intellect, a life of integrity, and a life of loving service to your fellow man and to your God.

I wish you well.

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